

The Food Safety and Inspection Service's After-Action-Report (AAR) for the Functional Level 4 COOP Exercise/Training Held On June 17, 2009

Background

On June 17, 2009, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) Office of Data Integration and Food Protection's (ODIFP) Emergency Response Staff (ERS) and Food Defense Assessment Staff (FDAS) conducted a Functional Level 4 Continuity of Operations (COOP) exercise/training session involving Agency COOP personnel. This exercise/training session was conducted as part of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Eagle Horizon National Level Exercise. This exercise is conducted annually to test COOP Plans across the Federal government. This year, DHS gave every Department the opportunity to test their plans in any manner they wanted. USDA then allowed its agencies to test and train in the manner that was most beneficial.

FSIS decided to conduct a Functional Level 4 COOP exercise/training session, which fulfilled its yearly requirement for testing and training. In addition, it satisfied the requirement to hold both a Joint Department/Agency and National Level exercise of FSIS' COOP Plans.

The exercise began at 8:00 am, when COOP personnel were notified through the standard channels that a Red Level Alert had been declared for Washington, D.C. that necessitated a Level 4 COOP activation event. Participants were instructed to begin acting as if it was a real COOP Level 4 event and make their way to FSIS' Emergency Relocation Facility (ERF). For this exercise, FSIS' COOP Level 3 ERF in Beltsville, Maryland was utilized as FSIS' COOP Level 4 ERF located in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Once participants arrived at the ERF, a brief introduction was given and they then went to their assigned cubicles to perform specified activities with the help of a facilitator provided by ERS and FDAS. Upon reconvening, the participants participated in a discussion of FSIS' COOP plan and their responsibilities. Afterwards, they then conducted a "Hot Wash" of what worked well and what was learned during the exercise/training session.

Objectives

FSIS' objectives for the exercise were as follows:

- Ensure that FSIS COOP personnel understand their roles and responsibilities;
- Ensure that FSIS COOP personnel were able to accomplish critical functions;
- Ensure that safeguards are in place and supporting activities are identified and coordinated;
- Verify that FSIS' COOP Call Down procedures are effective;

- Verify that equipment, supplies, and documentation are available and operational; and
- Verify that FSIS' Primary Mission Essential Functions are known and could be met by COOP Personnel from FSIS' ERF.

Observations

The following observations are based on comments provided by exercise participants. This includes COOP Personnel and facilitators. The observations have been organized by major phases of the exercise and are summarized below.

Notification of COOP Personnel

- All COOP personnel participating in the exercise/training were notified of the COOP event via e-mail and telephone.
- There was a technical issue with using FIMS to make contact with personnel, but ERS was able to implement a manual call down of COOP personnel to confirm that they received the E-mail message and were on their way to the ERF.
- Bryce Quick, FSIS Deputy Administrator was able to transfer command to the COOP Level 4 ERF at FSIS' Raleigh District Office

Finding and Arriving at FSIS' ERF

- All participating COOP personnel were able to find their way to the ERF on their own, in a timely manner.
- Bryce Quick, FSIS Deputy Administrator, was able to reclaim command from the Raleigh District Office once he arrived at the ERF.

Carrying out Critical COOP Functions and Tasks

- All participating COOP personnel were able to complete the assigned COOP tasks on their checklist.
- A few technical issues were identified during this portion of the exercise/training. They include:
 - Some of the laptops assigned to the cubicles were taken home by the employees displaced by the COOP personnel. This meant that they then had to share computers to complete assigned tasks. This is addressed in the follow up actions.
 - One laptop used in the exercise had difficulty logging on to FSIS' Incident Management System (FIMS)

Next steps to address these issues can be found in the recommendations section of this AAR.

COOP Plan Discussion

- During the roundtable discussion, no serious deficiencies in the participant's understanding of their roles and responsibilities were identified when it comes to COOP.
- The discussion did generate a number of good questions, which are identified below with answers when available.
 - Some participants wanted to know if during an actual COOP Level 4 event, would personnel in the Raleigh District be displaced. Mary Cutshall informed them that some personnel in the Raleigh District Office would be displaced during a COOP Level 4 to ensure that COOP participants had workspace. However, the ERF site in Omaha Nebraska has dedicated space for COOP Personnel and FSIS employees would not be displaced during a COOP event.
 - There was a question about whether or not the GETS cards provided priority access to cellular service as well as priority access to available landlines. The answer to this question was that the GETS cards that personnel currently have only provides them with priority access to available landlines, and does not provide priority access to cellular service.
 - One participant had a question about what they should do if their security clearance is about to expire. ODIFP will work with FSIS' Personnel Security Officer to ensure that FSIS employees with security clearances will be notified when their clearance is to be renewed, if it is necessary that the employee maintain a clearance.
 - One program area wanted to know if his or her order of succession had to have someone outside of Washington, D.C., for the second in line of succession. Mary Cutshall told the participants that only the Office of the Administrator had that requirement and the other program areas could make that determination on their own.
 - The procedures for notifying and activating the EMC during a COOP event were discussed. It was agreed that during a COOP Level 4 event the EMC would be alerted as to the situation and that personnel were in the process of implementing the Agency's COOP plan. The determination to activate the EMC would be made on a case-by-case basis by COOP personnel.
 - There was a desire for more information regarding how expenses and pay would be handled during a COOP emergency. The next steps for this issue are discussed more in this AAR underneath the recommendations section.
 - There was an in-depth discussion about the vital records the program areas are responsible for maintaining. The next steps for this issue are discussed more in this AAR underneath the recommendations section.
- FSIS' Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) stated that they would ensure an IT support member would accompany COOP personnel to an ERF site to assist with any technical issues that may arise.

General Thoughts Regarding the COOP Level 4 Exercise/Training Session

- Everyone agreed that having to perform the COOP tasks was extremely beneficial and helped them to learn how to accomplish the tasks.
- A number of participants felt that this was the best FSIS run exercise that they had participated in.
- Some participants said they would like to see some complications and obstacles added to the next COOP exercise now that they had this experience.
- All of the participants felt that facilitators were helpful and they commended their professionalism.
- A number of participants felt that personnel at the Raleigh and Omaha ERF sites should be trained as facilitators to help COOP personnel get set up during an actual COOP event.
- A few participants also noted that this exercise proved that FSIS could conduct high quality exercises and trainings without expensive contractor support. They felt it was a great thing given the tight budgetary environment.

Outcomes

FSIS was able to meet or exceed all of the objectives for this exercise. There were several minor glitches that would arise during any COOP event, but COOP personnel were able to quickly identify the issue and implement contingency planning. These minor glitches, such as FIMS' call down function being down, already have protocols developed addressing them and do not require new ones. The successful completion of the COOP Plan activities demonstrates that they work.

However, the exercise did highlight several issues and topics that will need to be addressed or clarified by FSIS to improve and help to ensure the Agency's ability to successfully COOP in the future. Recommendations addressing these issues can be found in the next section of this AAR.

Recommendations

ODIFP has listed the following actions and next steps that it believes should be taken in response to the lessons learned from the Functional COOP Level 4 exercise/training session along with expected completion dates for these actions and next steps.

- Contact FSIS' OCIO, and check to see if they need assistance from ERS to develop a list of IT support staff that would be available to accompany COOP personnel to an ERF site to assist with any technical issues that may arise. To be completed by July 30, 2009
- ERS will work with ERF site managers to ensure that vital equipment, such as laptops, will be available COOP Personnel working at ERF workstations. To be completed by July 30, 2009

- ERS will work with FSIS' OCIO to ensure that all laptops or computers assigned to an ERF site have an up to date FAIM load and can access FIMS. To be completed by September 15, 2009
- ERS will work with the Office of Management to help clarify how travel expenses and payroll would be handled during a COOP event and provide that information to COOP personnel. To be completed by August 30, 2009
- ERS will work with program areas to develop a list of vital records that would be used by multiple program areas. A CD containing these shared vital records will be developed so that program areas do not have to worry about duplicating vital records that are used by multiple program areas. In addition, a list of names and phone numbers for vital Department contacts will be created and added to FSIS' Vital records. To be completed by August 30, 2009
- Every 6 months ERS will include a message in the monthly COOP Call down test notifying participants to update their vital records and send four updated CDs containing the documents to ERS. This will be implemented during the November, 2009 COOP Call down test.
- ERS will study the validity and practicality of posting FSIS' vital records necessary for COOP on FIMS' library page or FSIS' Intranet site. To be completed by September 30, 2009
- ERS will work with ERF site managers to locate personnel willing to serve as facilitators during a COOP emergency and train them with the knowledge, skills, and abilities they will need to assist COOP personnel in reconstituting at an ERF site. To be completed by November 30, 2009